

Understanding Reality in the Vision of Advaita Vedānta

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WE, AS HUMAN BEINGS, are interested in reality. Unlike animals, we are able to ask questions about the nature of our experience. We understand that experiences are numerous and fleeting, so the question arises: What is the reality behind those experiences? From this question subsequent ones emerge: What does it mean to say something is ‘real’ or ‘unreal’? What is the nature of reality? Vedānta is a body of knowledge to analyze the nature of reality and its relationship to the individual (*jīva*). It applies a teaching methodology that has been handed down from teacher to student since time immemorial. The aim of Vedānta is to make one understand its fundamental tenet:¹

ब्रह्म सत्यं जगत् मिथ्या जीवो ब्रह्मैव नापरः

brahma satyaṃ jagat mithyā jīvo brahmaiva nāparaḥ

Brahman is the only truth (*satyam*), the world, *jagat*, is unreal (*mithyā*), and there is ultimately no difference between *brahman* and the individual self (*jīva*).

In this article I will explain the three categories Vedānta provides to understand reality: *sat* or *satyam*, *asat*, and *mithyā*.² When we talk about reality, we need to distinguish that-which-is-real from that-which-is-not-real. This discriminative inquiry is called *tattva-viveka*. In Sanskrit, that-which-is-real is called *satyam*, whereas that-which-is-not-real is called *asat*. *Satyam* means something is existing on its own and is not depending on something else for its existence. *Asat* means not existing at all, like ‘the horns of a hare’ or ‘a barren woman’s son’. *Mithyā* is what is depending on something else for its existence. Vedānta claims

¹ This *śloka* is from *Bālābodhinī*, attributed to Śaṅkarācārya.

² See Swami Dayananda (2004, 2012, 71–93, 2013, 93–105), Venugopal (2012, 204–220) and Brooks (1969) for further reading.

that only *brahman*, the Absolute, is *satyam*. Everything else is *mithyā*, depending on *brahman* for its existence, including the individual (*jīva*), which makes it non-separate from *brahman*. Understanding *satyam*, *asat* and *mithyā* results in a correct vision of reality. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Kṛṣṇa informs Arjuna:

नासतो विद्यते भावो नाभावो विद्यते सतः ।
उभयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥ २-१६ ॥

nāsato vidyate bhāvo nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ |
ubhayorapi dr̥ṣṭo 'ntastvanayostattvadarśibhiḥ || 2-16 ||

For the unreal (*asat*), there is never any being. For the real (*satyam*), there is never any non-being. The ultimate truth of both (the real and the unreal) is seen by the knowers of truth.

I will provide two examples to illustrate *mithyā*. They should clarify why a third category between *satyam* and *asat* is necessary. There are a number of words in English which are antonyms of ‘real’: Something can be illusionary, fictional, or non-existent. *Mithyā* is often translated with ‘illusion’, but it is more accurate to speak about dependent reality. We usually say that something is an illusion, if it appears to be different from what it actually is. For example, when we walk along a forest trail at dawn, it could happen that we believe we see a snake rolled up in front of us. But as we are getting closer, we realize there is only a coiled rope. The snake was an illusion.

In mathematics, there are universally true statements, like Pythagoras’ theorem, as well as universally false statements, like the claim that the angular sum of a triangle is 90°. ³ True statements in this sense are always true, independent of time, location or the viewpoint of the one who is making the claim. The same accounts to mathematically false statements. What has been recognized as absolutely true cannot be subject to negotiation, because it does not change. What has been recognized as absolutely false will never become true.

In between the two opposites, *satyam*, and *asat*, lies the peculiar realm of illusions. They appear to be real, but they cannot be taken as real in the above sense. Think about movies. We love to go to the movies and be part of a sci-fi epic or a thrilling blockbuster. The world within a movie is ‘less’ real than the world of our everyday lives. Illusions need certain conditions to be present: The

3 The mathematically inclined reader will notice that both statements are only valid within Euclidean geometry.

light of the movie projector has to be switched on, the film has to be inserted into the projector and so on. Otherwise we will sit in a silent, dark room. Let's take the snake example from above: To see a snake instead of a rope, there has to be twilight and furthermore there has to be a memorized image of a coiled snake in my mind. Without those conditions, my subconscious would not be able to project a snake onto a rope.

What is 'real'? The practical perspective

From a practical perspective, a car on the street has a different degree of reality than a car in a movie. But why? What makes the car on the street 'more' real? Let's start with a simple and pragmatic answer: its practical effect is stronger. I can only look at the car in the movie, whereas I can touch, drive, or repair the 'real' car. I can get in a car crash and, as a result, I may find myself in hospital. This will hardly happen with a car in the movie. Thus, we have found a pragmatic definition of what is 'real': The practical impact defines the reality of an object.

This sounds convincing. But we have to admit that this pragmatic aspect varies depending on the context. Fictional entities can have enormous consequences too! Let's take an example from the movies: Luke Skywalker and all figures of the Star Wars universe are practically real for the trademark holder, as they generate a significant amount of revenue. They are unreal as persons, but the story they are part of nevertheless has huge economic consequences.

In German, the word for 'reality' is 'Wirklichkeit'. It derives from the verb 'wirken', which means to have an effect, to act upon something, to operate, as opposed to something that is a mere illusion or has only apparent existence. We see that we need additional information, a context, to evaluate the 'realness' of an entity. Take the Star Wars characters: within the context of the economic reasoning of the trademark holder, the characters have a 'higher' degree of practical reality than for someone who is only enjoying the movie.

The degree of reality is the result of a *relationship* between the entity and a certain context. Consequently, the practical 'realness' of an entity is not an intrinsic quality. It is depending on many factors, which could be situational, economic, social, cultural and so on. Vedānta claims that the 'realness' of an object does not stem from the object itself.

Let's investigate this dependency relationship by using a classical example in Vedāntic teachings: A pot made out of clay. This example is deliberately simple,

so the student can grasp the principle easily and apply it to more complicated objects of inquiry, once it is fully assimilated.

The reality of a pot made out of clay

A pot of clay is clay in the form of a pot. It has practical value for its owner, so it fits our first definition. He or she can use it to carry water, to store food or it can function as a decoration. A pot of clay is a very simple object. It has basically no parts, unlike a table or a cart, and is made out of a single substance: clay. The existence of the pot is completely depending upon the clay. Therefore, clay has a higher degree of 'realness' than the pot.

In this example clay is *satyam* because the existence of the pot is dependent upon clay, so the pot cannot be *satyam* as it has no independent existence. The existence of the pot is 'received' from the clay, because there would be no pot without the clay. The pot has an odd mode of existence: It definitely exists, but has no existence on its own, since its existence is depending on clay. It is not unreal, *asat*, but also not independently real, *satyam*. This peculiar state is *mithyā*, dependent existence.

The pot adds nothing substantial to the clay: The weight of the pot is the weight of the clay. If you break the pot into pieces the clay is still there. The amount of clay has not been diminished, only the shape of the clay has changed. A pot is only name and form, *nāma-rūpa*, of clay. Clay can take many forms, not only pot-form. It can be moulded into cups, plates, vases and many more. It is independent of *nāma-rūpa*, hence it is *satyam* with respect to the various objects that can be moulded out of it.

This dependency relationship between pot and clay is not reflected in the English language. We say "a pot of clay", which implies the pot comes first and clay is an attribute. It seems that pot-form is *satyam* and clay is *mithyā*. But it is the opposite: Clay comes first and pot-form is an attribute of clay. From the vantage point of the clay, nothing substantial has been added when it has been shaped into the form of a pot and vice versa, nothing gets lost when the pot gets broken. When we look at the pot, we also see clay. We take the pot to be separate from clay, but by understanding the nature of the pot, we see there is no separation. Though pot is non-separate from clay, there is no reciprocal identity relationship between them. The pot is nothing but clay, but clay is not only the pot. If both were reciprocal to each other, both would be *satyam*, which is not the case.

The reality of money

Let's use this method of inquiry to investigate another ubiquitous entity: What is the reality of money? Ask someone on the street if money is real, you would hardly find anyone doubting it. But what actually 'is' money? We assume it is real, but what is the substratum of its reality? Is it independently real or does it depend on something for its existence? Is money just the amount of coins in your wallet? Certainly not, since money also appears as bills, cheques, and as digital data. Today the majority of the world's money is stored as binary code on hard drives. Is the reality of money the binary code on the hard drive, which is storing the balance of the bank account?

Let's imagine, an alien species visits our planet for the first time. In their foreign culture the concept of money is unknown. Would it be obvious for them to learn what money is, by simply investigating the data of the hard drive? All they could do is extracting the data, but they would lack the contextual information about what to do with it. Therefore, money, which seems very 'real' to us practically, has no physical substratum. It is only by convention that coins, bills, or digital data act as a symbolic carrier for money. The reality of 10 USD does not originate from a 10-dollar bill. If the money were 'in' the bill, it would be impossible to replace an old bill for a new one. Physical carriers, like coins or bills, act as a medium for money, but they 'are' not money.

Money depends on the convention between trade parties

The question persists: What is the reality of money? Isn't it surprising that there is no straightforward answer for something which seems to be very real for us? We are using it almost daily! Let's take the most simple definition of money: Money is an abstract medium for trade. Abstract means that there is no restriction to the objects of trade. Having money as an intermediary, virtually any object can be traded given the trade parties agree on the legitimacy of money. If money is not accepted by one of trade parties, there will be no trade at all.

Pushing this example to its limits: If there would be no one accepting money as a legitimate medium of trade, there wouldn't exist any money at all, no matter how many coins or bills exist on the planet. Therefore, the reality of money is the reality of the convention of the trade parties. Nothing outside of this agreement could give money its reality. Money is *mithyā*, depending on the convention of the trade parties. We habitually believe that money is a 'thing'

that exists independently of 'us'. But when we inquire into this assumption, it turns out to be a misunderstanding.

Understanding reality as a dependency relationship

These examples should demonstrate that reality can be analyzed through a series of dependency relationships. Money is *mithyā*, depending on the convention of the trade parties. A pot of clay is *mithyā*, depending on clay for its existence. But is clay ultimately *satyam*, dependent on nothing else for its existence? No, because clay itself depends on something else. It is made out of a variety of minerals, which are made out of atoms, which are made out of subatomic particles and so forth. Now the question arises: If we trace back the dependency relationships, do we find an ultimate substance? Something which is not dependent on anything else for its existence?

Within the paradigm of materialism, we would claim the ultimate substances are the particles and forces of the Standard Model of physics. According to this model, everything is dependent upon them. But when we take into account the tenets of quantum physics, a purely materialistic viewpoint is no longer valid. In quantum physics the term 'measurement' comes into the picture as an ontological category. The state of a particle in quantum theory is mathematically expressed as a wave function Ψ . Raised to the square it has the same characteristics as a probability density function. Unlike in classical physics, the state of a particle at a certain time can only be described by a probability. According to the Copenhagen Interpretation, measurement lets the wave function collapse. This collapse results in a specific value of the measured variable. Quantum physics posits a non-separability of measurement and the measured variable. A theory that unifies the Standard Model and quantum physics is still missing. So within physics, we cannot find that which is ultimately *satyam*.

René Descartes, the French philosopher, was also interested in this matter. In a process of inquiry, he tried to find what is true and cannot be doubted. His conclusion was that there cannot be any doubt about my own existence. He bundled the 'I' with the thinking faculty and stated: "There is cognition, therefore I exist". Descartes was a dualist, upholding the distinction between mind and matter. Still, his argument points to what is empirically evident: "I exist" and furthermore, "I am conscious". Both statements depend on each other and none of them can be negated. We will use these findings as a starting point for our investigation.

Inquiry into the nature of the self

In Vedānta, the 'I' is referred to as the self. The self cannot be reduced to something else, because it is a given. All experiences and mental phenomena, *vr̥tti-s*, like thoughts or emotions, are fleeting, but what stays is the subject, that-which-experiences, but is itself never an object of experience. This fact is easy to overlook. In the same way as a movie screen is untouched by the movie that is projected onto it, mental phenomena and sense-perceptions do not modify that-which-experiences. It is the stable basis of perception. Since all perceived objects are fleeting, none of them could be accounted for the self. By ruling out all the impermanent *vr̥tti-s*, we discover that-which-experiences or pure consciousness, *cit*. This process of inquiry is called *dr̥g-dr̥śya-viveka*, discrimination between the seer and the seen. When the student applies this method to himself with dedication over a longer period, pure consciousness, *cit*, gets recognized.

Cit is identical with the self, which is what I am, because I am that-which-experiences all impermanent objects of experience. What is the result, when we subtract all objects of experience from the subject? Do we experience the body? Do we experience thoughts and emotions? Yes we do, so they do not belong to that-which-experiences, the subject of experience. When we eliminate all objects of experience from the subject, what is left is no longer a personal 'me' but a universal subject, devoid of any personal traits. It is still what I am, because what applies to the universal subject applies also to me: I am that-which-experiences, *cit*. What is the nature of this subject? Śaṅkarācārya informs us in *Tattvabodhaḥ*:

तत्त्वविवेकः कः
आत्मा सत्यं तदन्यत् सर्वं मिथ्येति ॥

tattvavivekaḥ kaḥ
ātmā satyaṁ tadanyat sarvaṁ mithyeti ||

What is the discriminative knowledge of truth?

Ātmā, (I) is the truth, *satya*; all else other than this is *mithyā*.

Ātmā means 'I', the self. The statement claims that the self is *satyam*. It does not depend on something else for its existence. Logically, there cannot be two entities that are qualified as *satyam*, because if there would be two of them, one would have to be dependent on the other for its existence, which would make it

mithyā. If *ātmā* is *satyam*, everything else, *anātmā*, has to be *mithyā*. This is revealed by the Upaniṣads. Inquiry into the nature of existence by discriminating between *satyam* and *mithyā* is *tattva-viveka*. It leads to *tattva*, the truth of the object of inquiry, which is the nature of reality.

Consciousness, *cit*, is *satyam*

I, *ātmā*, exist and my existence cannot be negated. Furthermore, I'm very sure that I am conscious. To state "I'm not conscious" would be self-refuting the moment I'm making the claim. The statement that consciousness, *cit*, is my very nature, cannot be negated as well. If you ask yourself the question: "Am I conscious right now?" The answer cannot be different from "Yes". Therefore, consciousness, *cit*, exists and it is what I am, so it is *cit-ātmā* too.

Is consciousness depending on something else for its existence? Neuroscientists assume that consciousness is generated by the brain. But this is an unproven hypothesis. The philosophical elaboration of the underlying question is called the 'Hard Problem of Consciousness'.⁴ It states that the subjective quality of experience cannot be explained by objective science. A corollary of this statement is the unprovability of the hypothesis that consciousness is produced by the brain.

For our inquiry it is enough to contemplate the fact that whatever object we are experiencing, consciousness must be there in the first place to experience it. When we investigate our experience, consciousness is always present. No object would be perceivable without consciousness being aware of the object. The contents of consciousness are ever-changing: colors, tastes, smells, thoughts, emotions, and so forth. But whatever we are experiencing, we need consciousness in the first place to experience it. Is there a world independent of consciousness? There is no way to prove it. We assume it in our daily life, but if we do the work of thorough investigation, we have to admit that it is only a belief.

The primacy of consciousness is an empirical fact. Therefore, *cit* is *satyam*, and because we cannot get one without the other, we can equate them, so *satyam* is also *cit*. There is no other *satyam* than *cit*, since consciousness gives existence to all objects. Like the pot 'receives' its existence from clay, all perceived objects 'receive' their existence from consciousness. There would be no reality without consciousness. Therefore, reality is non-separate, *advaitam*,

4 See Chalmers (1997) for an introduction to this topic.

from consciousness. The contents of consciousness are depending upon consciousness, hence they are *mithyā*, dependent reality, having *sat-cit* as their substratum. Like clay, which can be molded into various shapes and forms, *sat-cit* gives rise to everything that is experienced.

Consciousness is limitless, *anantam*

What is ‘everything that is experienced’? It is the empirical universe, the world, *jagat*, which consists of everything we experience. Every object or content of consciousness is *jagat*, and this *jagat* is *mithyā*, depending upon *sat-cit* for its existence. Not only the gross objects, but also the subtle ones, like emotions, thoughts, concepts and so forth. There is literally no limitation to the possible contents of consciousness. Even when you say, “I found something that cannot be an object of consciousness” you have proven yourself wrong at the very instance, since this ‘something’ has to be already a content of consciousness to make the claim in the first place.

Is consciousness limited space-wise or time-wise? If yes, consciousness would be an object within space and time, having a certain location, a certain spatial and temporal expansion. But this is not the case. Consciousness is not an object within space and time. It is the other way round: Space and time are experienced in consciousness, so they are also *mithyā*. Furthermore, *sat-cit* is not limited spatially. Consequently, there cannot be two of them, otherwise they would have a spatial border. Therefore, *sat-cit* can only be one. If we apply this reasoning to time, the same applies. As time is *mithyā* to *sat-cit*, *sat-cit* cannot be dependent upon time. Hence, *sat-cit* is beyond time, which means it is uncreated, *ajāti*, and eternal.

We mentioned before that what is unreal is called *asat*. Think of ‘horns of a hare’ or a ‘square circle’. That-which-is-unreal, *asat*, by definition cannot be an object of cognition, since it is a paradoxically constructed concept. Even when we talk about a ‘square circle’, the words appear in our minds, but what is missing is the inner vision of an object that would fit to the words. Likewise, when we think of the concept ‘nothing’, the term is still an object of cognition, so it exists as a content of consciousness. We cannot find anything that is outside of consciousness, since the moment we think of it, it comes into being as a concept.

Therefore, no limit can be found to consciousness. No content, may it be an abstract concept, a thought, an emotion or a sense-perception is outside of consciousness, nor is it limited spatially or temporally. It is limitless, *anantam*,

or *ānanda*. *Ānanda* is often translated as bliss, but it is more accurate to speak of limitlessness or fullness. Bliss implies a positive emotion. As all emotions have a beginning and an end, the nature of consciousness cannot be an emotion. Otherwise consciousness would cease to exist when the emotion fades.⁵ Reality, which we have already equated with *sat-cit* is *anantam*, boundless limitlessness. It is lacking nothing, so *sat-cit-anantam* is a complete, seamless totality. Everything depends on it, as we have seen before, so consequently, it depends on nothing. Hence, it is the Absolute, *brahman*. This is revealed in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad:

सत्यं ज्ञानमनन्तं ब्रह्म

satyaṃ jñānamanantaṃ brahma

Brahman is fundamental (*satyaṃ*), limitless (*anantam*) consciousness or knowingness (*jñānam*).

This sentence defines *brahman*. The three terms are not qualifying attributes of *brahman*, in the same way a lotus flower can have a certain color, blue or red, as a qualifying attribute. Instead they are defining attributes. *Brahman* is nothing other than *satyaṃ*, *jñānam* and *anantam*. No object can be separate from *brahman*, otherwise it would not be limitless. It is the fundamental cause, *satyaṃ*, everything else is depending on it, *mithyā*. When we look at the pot, we also see clay. Likewise, when we look at any object, we see *brahman* too, apparently limited by *nāma-rūpa*. As *brahman* depends on nothing, it is absolutely free, whereas what is *mithyā* is totally bound. The pot has zero degrees of freedom with respect to the clay. The clay has unlimited degrees of freedom with respect to the forms into which it can be shaped.

I am limitless consciousness, *sat-cit-anantam*

The self, *ātmā*, is identical to *sat-cit*, so I am *sat-cit-ātmā*. I exist and I am conscious. Taking the above statements into consideration, *sat-cit-ātmā* has also to be *sat-cit-anantam*, because nothing can be outside of *sat-cit-anantam*. Therefore, you, being existing consciousness, *sat-cit-ātmā*, are one with the boundless reality of *sat-cit-anantam*, which is *brahman*, the Absolute, because there cannot be a difference between *sat-cit-ātmā* and *sat-cit-anantam*. Otherwise we

5 See Swami Dayananda (1999) for a discussion of this topic.

would have two kinds of *sat-cit*, which would have to be separate spatially or temporally. We have shown above that this cannot be the case.

When we analyze empirical and mental phenomena by using the reasoning of Vedānta, all objects that seem to have independent existence are unveiled as being *mithyā*. What is left is the subject, the self, *ātmā*. In this analysis all objects and dualistic concepts are traced back to their source, *sat-cit-anantam*, which is *sat-cit-ātmā*, the self. No object, emotion, thought, sense perception, or mental impression can be separate from it. How far away is the pot from the clay? The pot is nothing else than clay, so their distance is zero. Likewise, the distance between any object to *brahman* is zero. If there were a multitude of separately existing entities, each of them being *satyam*, reality would split into a plurality of monads, none having contact with any other. This is not our experience of reality, because we interact with the world around us. Consequently, it is the opposite: Reality seems to be crowded with a multitude of objects, but by inquiry we understand that the truth behind them is only one, limitless consciousness. Everything is depending on *sat-cit-anantam* or *brahman*, which is what you are, but it depends on nothing.

The purpose of Vedānta is to make one see this truth. The difficulties we are facing in life are stemming from ignorance about this fact. We take ourselves to be *mithyā*, depending on something: our body, our social status, our friends and relatives, our money in the bank account, our thoughts, our emotions, etc. Since we believe ourselves to be dependent on them, we feel bounded, insecure and vulnerable, because all of them could be lost. We try to improve our security by taking care of the body, increasing our social status and accumulating more money. But no matter how much we have acquired, a sense of insecurity remains. Furthermore, we take the world, *jagat*, to be independently existing, *satyam*. We assume that *jagat* has been there before our birth and will be there after our death. This belief makes us feel small and insignificant. But we have come to understand that it is the other way round: *Jagat* is *mithyā*, and our true identity, limitless consciousness, *cit-anantam*, is in fact *satyam*. Because it is *satyam*, by definition depending on nothing, it is absolutely free.

We have been ignorant about the nature of reality. Out of that ignorance anxieties, worries, and fears have arisen from childhood on and buried themselves deeply into our psyche. We are attached to what is *mithyā*: our body, our belongings, sense pleasures, beliefs, and so forth. And we are ignorant about what we truly are. You are *sat-cit-anantam*, you are the whole, on which the world, *jagat*, depends. The aim of Vedānta is to correct our confusion about the reality

of the world and the reality of ourselves. A correct vision of reality is the most effective antidote to cure the afflictions of our psyche. This can be achieved by listening to a qualified teacher with a prepared and open mind, *śravaṇam*, reflecting on the teachings until all doubts are removed, *mananam*, and applying the teachings, *nididhyāsanam*, until one abides in the problemlessness of an informed mind.

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To my first teacher, Francis Lucille

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